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Keep your tools sharp

Do the tools we rely on for decision support naturally become less effective over time? **Susan Lattanzio** is part of an academic research project investigating this phenomenon.

That organisations are dynamic will not be a revelation to you. Each of you will be able to give examples of how your job, department, company structure, or external factors such as regulation and legislation changes have impacted your organisation.

If this is known to be the case, then would it not follow that for decision support tools to remain relevant, they should adapt to reflect the dynamic nature of your business? This is the basis of the research currently taking place at the University of Bath in collaboration with National Grid.

Our review demonstrates that sustaining the performance of new organisational initiatives is a challenge. Estimates are that between two thirds and 90 per cent of new initiatives are unsuccessful. One of the factors identified for such failures is that the organisation itself has changed.

Despite this recognised phenomenon, little consideration appears to have been given to making sure decision support tools evolve in line with organisations' changing needs. In general tools are created to be static, even though the environment in which they operate is dynamic.

Seem familiar?

If you were at the IAM Annual Conference 2016, you may have seen Susan introduce her work in a NxtGen Pitch and Poster session. For more about NxtGen's work, see theIAM.org/NxtGen

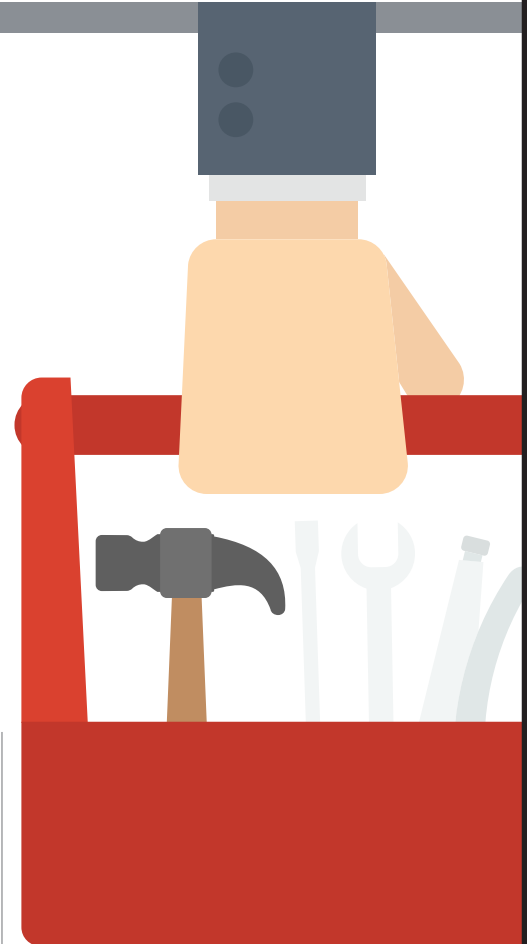
We believe this can lead to a decay in performance whereby the usefulness of the tool decreases, or the value it offers declines. This has been recognised within National Grid and they are championing ground-breaking research in this area.

As part of the research, a number of IAM Member organisations have been recruited to take part in an expert panel. Through the use of a questionnaire we have tested whether they believe that performance decay occurs, and what supports that perception. We then compared their insights to the reasons why initiatives in other business areas have proved challenging to sustain.

Origins of decay

Our results showed there is a widely held perception that decision support tools' performance does decay. Some saw this as originating within the tools; others thought that the tools sustain their usefulness but the systems in which the tools operate decay. The reasons for system decay might include people not using the most up-to-date data, or additional demands on staff reducing support for the tools.

The reasons for performance decay broadly aligned to what previous studies had found to hinder success for other business initiatives – with two notable differences. First, the boundaries of the influencing factors are wider for decision support tools, with a greater appreciation of the effect of external change (such as regulation and legislation) on tool performance. Second, the quality of data is seen as more relevant than its availability.



As the findings from our review, including the input from the IAM expert panel, seem to confirm that decision support tool performance does deteriorate over time, the research project now aims to create a systematic approach to combating this performance decay.

Join in

For more information, or to be involved in future stages of the research, please email s.lattanzio@bath.ac.uk

Author's biography

Susan Lattanzio is a doctorate researcher at the University of Bath, working in the field of physical asset management as part of a cross-disciplined team. Their work – a collaboration between The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), National Grid and the University of Bath – is funded under an Industrial Case Award (iCASE) and supervised by Prof Linda Newnes and Dr Marcelle McManus (The University of Bath) and Derrick Dunkley (National Grid).